



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: October 22, 2020

Agenda Item: Maclay Ranch Conservation Easement, Region 2

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background: FWP seeks endorsement to pursue the 832-acre Maclay Ranch conservation easement (CE), located approximately 1.5 miles south of Lolo in Missoula County. The Maclay Ranch CE would be an essential component of a network of protected public and private lands that form a corridor across the northern Bitterroot Valley (see map). This corridor is in an area consistently identified as important for conserving landscape-scale connectivity for wide-ranging and migratory wildlife. The section of US Highway 93 through this area has a high number of wildlife collisions, and elk and bears have crossed or attempted to cross the valley in the area of the proposed CE. Because of the value of the area as a movement corridor, the portion of Highway 93 to which the Maclay Ranch CE would connect is a priority for possible future investment in wildlife crossing structures.

The primary habitat benefits of the property are elk/deer winter range and adjacent hiding cover, as well as a mosaic of burned and unburned forest in the higher elevations. The diversity of forest types supports a variety of forest-dwelling wildlife species including state species of concern. The property also contains open grasslands, which are a limited habitat type in the Bitterroot Valley. The grasslands provide hunting grounds for raptors and nesting and foraging habitat for songbirds. Wetlands and wet meadows on the property also provide habitat for a range of species.

The ranch is adjacent to a 642-acre parcel of State School Trust land as well as the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF); these public lands are currently difficult for the public to access. An FWP-held CE on the Maclay Ranch would ensure hunting opportunities on the ranch itself and would greatly improve access to the state and BNF lands. Five Valleys Land Trust (FVLT) has been an important partner for assembling this proposal and is committed to continuing to facilitate work on this project if endorsed by the commission.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP has not sought public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the commission, the department would proceed with negotiations and conduct appropriate analysis and public review process.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be conducted by FWP if this proposal receives commission endorsement.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposal. The Maclay Ranch supports habitat connectivity, wintering ungulates, and other wildlife habitat values. As well, public hunting access to the ranch and adjacent public lands would be highly valued.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission endorse the proposed Maclay Ranch Conservation Easement, allowing FWP to conduct further analysis and associated public review.